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COMICS INTERVIEW

#92

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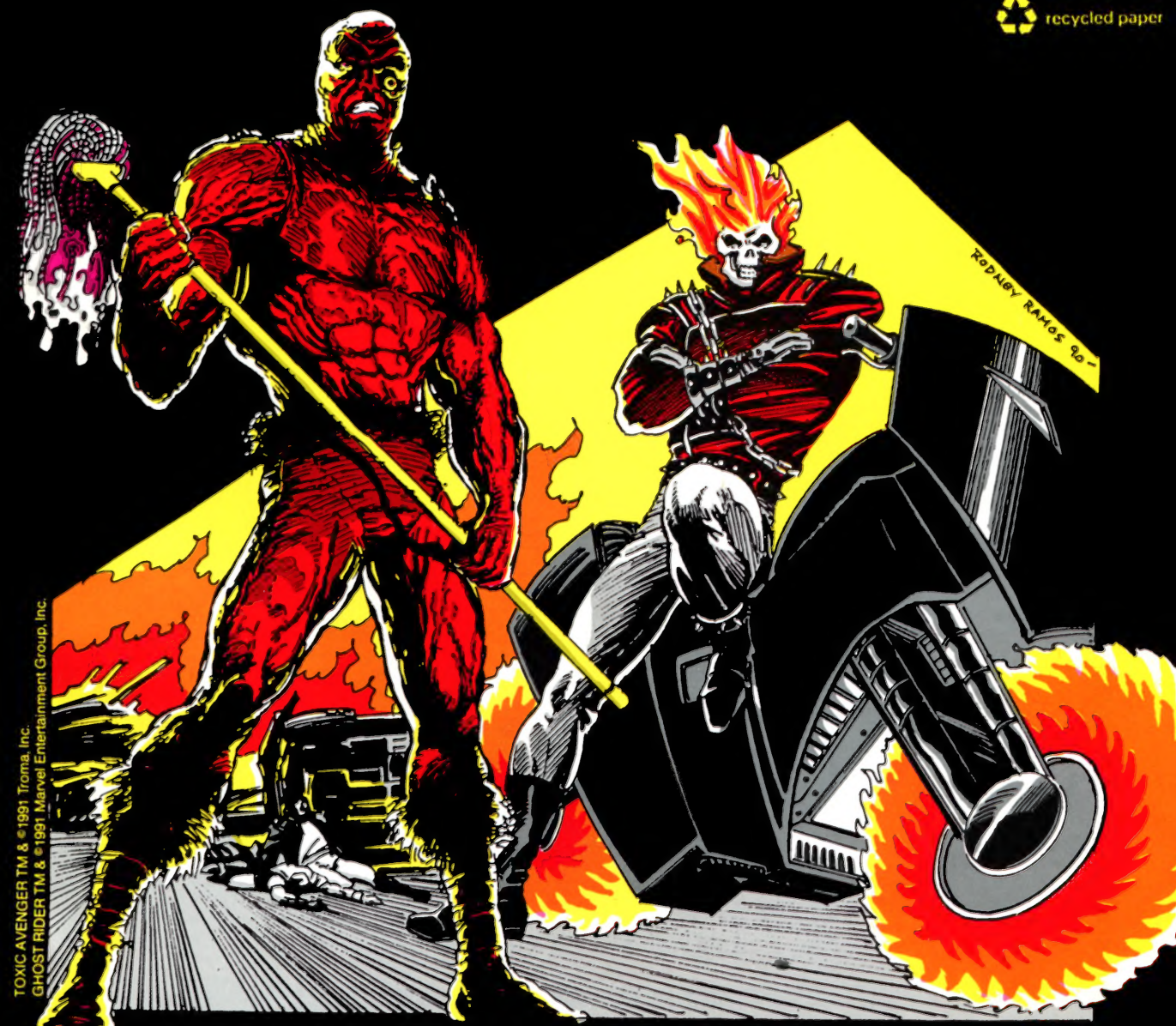

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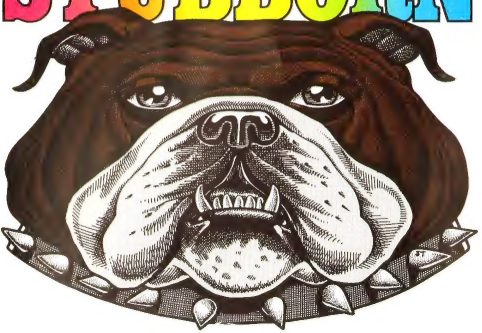

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UP FRONT

For years, science-fiction fans have argued over whether the "Golden Age of Science Fiction" was the 1930s, when AMAZING STORIES was in its heyday, the '40s, when ASTOUNDING was developing such authors as **Heinlein** and **Asimov**, the '50s, when GALAXY was redefining the genre, or the '60s, when the New Wave was in flower. Perhaps the wisest thing ever said on the subject was this:

"The Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve."

In other words, whatever it is that's available to tickle your sense of wonder at the critical time of early adolescence — that's what you think of, all your life, as the best science fiction ever published.

Among comics fans, people split hairs over the exact month the Golden Age began and ended, what, precisely, constitutes the Silver Age, and what metal best characterizes the age we're in now (platinum? tin? brass?). But practically nobody disputes the idea that the proliferation of superheroes right around the beginning of World War II epitomizes the Golden Age of Comics.

Ever see comic books from that period? There are exceptions, of course — **Jack Cole** and *C.C.* **Beck** spring to mind — but by and large, the comics published then were garbage. I thought "Golden Age" meant quality!

How did we come to think of that pile of crapola as the Golden Age? I think it's because the founders of comics fandom were around 12 years old right then, and they somehow managed to foist the idea off on the rest of us.

This was made easier by the fact that comics of that period are so expensive, few people are in a position to refute it. By now, of course, it's become entrenched in dealer terminology, and is perpetuated by people who have a monetary interest in putting across the idea that their mouldering wares come from a legendary time of wonderment.

It's high time this was reevaluated. What period do *you* think was the Golden Age of Comics? I mean, *really!*

— Don Markstein

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"Vengeance and death are not necessarily the same thing."

HOWARD MACKIE

Very few writers in comics have their first big assignment sell out. Howard Mackie is one of the lucky few; he saw the first issue of his new version of Marvel's Ghost Rider go to a second printing. How he feels about that success and the source of this new version of the flaming skull on motorcycle are the backbone of this chat . . .

PATRICK DANIEL O'NEILL: *As a name, Ghost Rider's been around in comics for something like 40 years. As a character at Marvel, as this flaming-skull-headed cycle-rider, he's been around about 15 years. It wasn't particularly successful the first time around . . .*

HOWARD MACKIE: As I understand, it was not completely unsuccessful.

PAT: *My memory is that it was successful in its first year or so when it had a solid art team with Mike Ploog and there seemed to be a real direction to it. But when the original creative team left, it seemed to flounder all over the map.*

HOWARD: A lot of my knowledge is mostly hear-say. I was a fan of the original series, but more toward the end, when **Marc DeMatteis** was writing it with **Bob Budiansky** on the art. At the end, actually, it was doing pretty well again, but for whatever reasons, there was a business decision to cancel it and make room for new titles. That's what I'm told by people who were at Marvel at the time. . . .

Since its first cancellation, there has always been a steady flow of mail asking where the Ghost Rider was and could we bring him back. Certainly, if I wasn't

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Howard Mackie
Age: 32
Birthplace: Cypress Hills, Brooklyn
Education: Bernard Baruch College, New York, major in marketing
Credits: (current) editor of AVENGERS, AVENGERS WEST COAST, CAPTAIN AMERICA, IRON MAN, writer of GHOST RIDER; (past) writer of CHUCK NORRIS AND HIS KARATE COMMANDOS, AIR RAIDERS
Mentor: Mark Gruenwald

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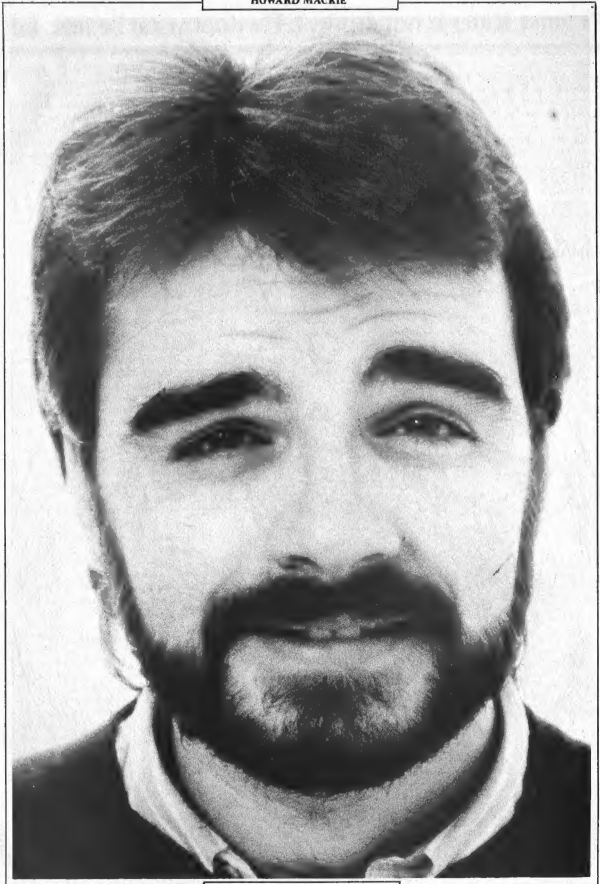


"Ghost Rider is not amoral. He does what he feels he

working in the business, I would have been one of those people writing in — because I really liked the character. I especially liked the visual. Without a doubt, it's one of the more striking visuals in the Marvel Universe. It certainly gets people's attention right off the bat. That's always stuck in my mind and it's one of the reasons I did the proposal.

PAT: *As important as the visual can be, if you can't tie a good character and a good storyline to it, it's nothing more than pretty pictures. Run down what you see as the basics of the concept of this version of Ghost Rider.*

HOWARD: The setting of the book is Brooklyn. I grew up in the area where the book takes place. Cypress Hills. Anybody who is familiar with Cypress Hills immediately says, "Oh — near the cemetery." Because Cypress Hills is surrounded by cemeteries. It's near the border with Queens, in East New York. My three sisters always called it Cypress Hills; I always called it East New York, because it sounds a lot tougher. I spent the first 25 years of my life there.

PAT: *That can be a pretty tough neighborhood.*

HOWARD: It is now. It wasn't that bad, then. It was not a bad place to grow up, actually. When I was growing up there, it was family-oriented, with a real community feel to it.

PAT: *Working class?*

HOWARD: Definitely. And mixed ethnic backgrounds. Instead of having a park, you had a cemetery. The exposure to trees and grass was in the cemetery, including little bunny rabbits running around. Other than that, it was a completely normal environment to grow up in.

The cemetery hangs very heavily in my background. I grew up in the cemetery — when I was very young, I was playing soldiers with my friends in the cemetery. When I got older, when I was a teenager,

has to do. What drives him is still being explored."

one of my friends' father was the caretaker of the cemetery, and his house was right in the middle of one of the cemeteries. We used to go and hang out there until all hours of the night. I draw upon that quite a bit, if not for actual stories in GHOST RIDER, then for a lot of the mood.

That is the beginning of the character for me. It starts with the cemetery and the young adult who discovers the motorcycle in a junkyard that backs up to one of the cemeteries — Dan Catch — finds it on the night that his sister is mortally wounded. Dan is a young man who lives in Cypress Hills, across the street from the cemetery, much like I did.

He and his sister witness a crime committed by Deathwatch — who is a pretty big part of the GHOST RIDER book. Dan's sister is mortally wounded, they are pursued, Dan is helping his sister along, covered in her blood. They hide in the junkyard and Dan stumbles upon what appears to be a normal, very new motorcycle. He reaches out towards it, his hand covered in his sister's blood, and all kinds of fun things start happening.

Things glow and Dan is transformed into the Ghost Rider, the spirit of vengeance. The basic premise for the character is that he is out to avenge the spilling of innocent blood. He also tries to prevent further spilling of innocent blood. He's not exactly easy on those who harm the innocent. Ghost Rider, as suits the visual, is not a softy.

PAT: *Ghost Rider can be seen as one of a growing string of popular characters in comics who are hard-nosed, hard-assed, violent — a line of characters that includes Punisher, Wolverine, Lobo over at DC. First of all, what in your mind is the appeal of those characters to the comics-reading public?*

HOWARD: I think they don't pull any punches. They hit a nerve; Ghost Rider is not amoral, by any stretch of the imagination, but he's also very straightforward. He does what he feels he has to do. What drives him to do this is still being explored within the book and by the character. He's not clear on it himself; he knows he's serving the spirit of vengeance, but he doesn't quite know what that means. Hopefully, as the writer, *I* do, because I'll have to explain it at some point.

As far as the appeal of those characters — I think the current trend in comics and TV and movies is violent. But I think there's mostly *implied* violence in GHOST RIDER. It's not as graphic a book as it could be . . . as you read the book, one's memory is that it is more graphic in its violence than it really is. I think a lot of the hard-edged, violent nature of the book comes with the visual — a leather-clad, chain-bearing, cycle-riding, flaming skull. Ghost Rider, to this point, has never killed anyone . . . which I believe sets him apart from all the other characters you named.

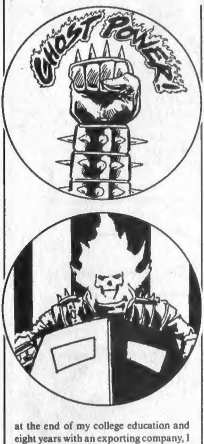
As a matter of fact, in the team-up of Ghost Rider and Punisher against Flag-Smasher, the Punisher wants to kill him and Ghost Rider doesn't let him. His line is, "I serve vengeance" — and vengeance and death are not necessarily the same thing to Ghost Rider. If push came to shove, he might kill someone — that remains to be seen.

PAT: *Let's do a little background on Howard Mackie. We've already established that you were born and raised in East New York/Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, in the shadow of the cemetery. What's your educational background?*

HOWARD: I went to Bernard Baruch college, as a marketing major. I realized

Previous page: Illustration by the current artist for Marvel's GHOST RIDER series. Below, illustration by Howard's original co-conspirator, Bob Budiansky, in pencil form.

"I'm astonished by the success of GHOST RIDER."



at the end of my college education and eight years with an exporting company, I had very little interest in staying in the business world.

PAT: *How'd you get into comics?*

HOWARD: **Mike Carlin** and I grew up together. We met in Cypress Hills. I've known Mike for about 18 years. I was pretty unhappy in my job with the exporting company and I knew it wasn't what I wanted to keep doing. Mike, at that time, was **Mark Gruenwald**'s assistant editor and, when he was promoted to full editor, he suggested that I apply for the job as Mark's assistant.

I was a comic-book reader when I was very young. I had a brief period when I wasn't following comics, but when Mike got his job at Marvel, I got interested again and got caught up on Marvel's continuity. So, I went to an interview with Mark and Mark felt I was qualified and he seemed to think we could get along — meaning we could share an office for eight or more hours a day without killing each other. I worked for Mark as an assistant editor for two and a half years on the AVENGERS line of books . . . and I inherited those books when Mark moved up to executive editor and I became a full editor.

PAT: *How did you turn into a writer?*

HOWARD: I've always been interested in it and my buddy Mike always encouraged me to put things down on paper. I rarely if ever listened to him, but finally **Mark Gruenwald** got me to write my first comic-book story — an issue of IRON MAN. I did it because **Denny O'Neil,** who had been writing the book, had left the company and there were lots of plot lines that needed to be tied up quickly. Mark knew I had been working pretty closely with Denny and it was a good time for me to try my hand at writing. **Jim Shooter,** then editor in chief, felt that every editorial staff member should at least try their hand at writing, so we gained a better idea of what happened on the other side of the desk.

I tried it out under some heavy guidance from Mark — I consider Mark my mentor as far as any writing I've done — and the plot was accepted and published and did fairly well . . . and I found out I really enjoyed writing comic books. I did a few other things between that and GHOST RIDER; I wrote some books that were read by very few people. *(Laughter.)*

There was a brief stint on a book called CHUCK NORRIS AND HIS KARATE COMMANDOS, another one on AIR RAIDER. Both of those were licensed titles, toy tie-ins. I did an issue of POWER PACK. I did some stuff for AVENGERS SPOTLIGHT — a very unnoteworthy run. I really wasn't doing much except fill-ins.

I had always had an interest in Ghost Rider; I think **Mark Gruenwald** knew that and really encouraged me — more than encouraged me, *pushed* me — toward putting my ideas on paper and submitting it as a new series proposal. I was very surprised when it was accepted.

PAT: *Beyond the theme of the spirit of vengeance, is there a theme or a point in GHOST RIDER that you as a writer are trying to get across?*

HOWARD: There are a lot of things. I'm a new writer; I have to say I'm astonished by the success of GHOST RIDER. I'm a little intimidated by it . . . I was not expecting it to take off as well as it did. As a result, I find that I'm learning as I'm going along — not only about writing in general; but I do know there are themes I want to explore and unfortunately a lot of them are getting jumbled up at the beginning. As I go along, I'm getting more focused.

I could give you some trite answers — "good vs. evil" *(Laughter.)* . . .

PAT: *That's one of the basics of heroic fiction, somewhere in there.*

HOWARD: I'd like to be able to give you a clearer answer, but this is a learning process for me, too. Not only about writing but about the character. My perception of the character, my feel for him, has changed a lot since issue #1. I didn't really expect it to take off as it did. I thought it would be a nice little book for me to write and a few people would read it and build an audience slowly.

It's not in my experience to have issue #1 sell out and go to a second printing.

"I'm not claiming to be writing the great American novel."

That floored me. All of a sudden, I have to start thinking seriously about what I'm trying to say, so when somebody asks me that in an interview, I'll be able to give a good answer.

And obviously, I haven't thought about it hard enough, yet.

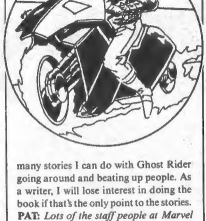
PAT: *Have you gotten any impression about who your readers are on this title?*

HOWARD: When you go out on appearances, at conventions and such, it's really good, on one hand, but I don't think it really does give you a clear picture of who the majority of your readership is. These are, for the most part, people who are going to go to conventions. I read all the fan mail and it seems to be a very wide audience . . . from teenagers to service people. It's a wide group, as it is with most comics. It's a teen-age audience I'm writing to — and if there's an older audience following it, that's good, too. Hopefully, there's something for everyone.

PAT: *I think there is a supposition among some people that the hard-core, central "pick-up-every-single-appearance" type fan of a book like GHOST RIDER is interested in the kick-ass nature of the character and not necessarily in any nuances that you as a writer may be trying to put into — to use a fancy criticism term — the subtext. I have heard books like GHOST RIDER be put down because they are seen as being merely an attempt by a publisher or a writer to appeal to a certain prurient interest, if you will. To confirm that, or throw it out the window, do you get that in the mail? Do people write in enthusing over that part of the character?*

HOWARD: No. That certainly is *part* of what we get in the mail. I can't give you numbers — 60 percent, 40 percent — but the response I've gotten so far has not been just "here's this bad-assed, flaming-skulled motorcycle rider from Hell who's going out there and kicking ass." That has not been the only appeal. Is that *part* of the appeal? Yes, of course. I'm not going to deny that; I'm not claiming to be writing the great American novel. The appeal for *me* started with the visual and went from there. As a writer, I'm trying to create more from that, and I think the character has developed beyond that — not only Ghost Rider but Dan Catch. The contrast between the two and the way they are forced to deal with one another . . . and the way everybody else perceives the Ghost Rider . . . is developing.

But the fan response has not just been to the perceived violent nature of the character. I do know that, in the fan press, the little bit of fan press GHOST RIDER has gotten has been exactly what you said. I can understand that — I'm not going to criticize the critics. I hope everyone will be able to get past that eventually. In many ways, it's just as much a knee-jerk reaction to automatically criticize this kind of book and then not bother to look past the surface. I like to think there's more there . . . and ultimately that is what will sustain my interest in the book. There are only so



many stories I can do with Ghost Rider going around and beating up people. As a writer, I will lose interest in doing the book if that's the only point to the stories.

PAT: *Lots of the staff people at Marvel who begin freelancing and get a big hit eventually decide, "Hey, I'm making more money freelancing than on staff," and go on to freelance full time. Do you see that in your future?*

HOWARD: That's not out of the realm of possibility, but I happen to enjoy being an editor as well. I find I can express as much creativity in the editing side of my job as in the writing side. GHOST RIDER's success has taken me a bit by surprise. Would I like to write other things? Yes. If I am fortunate enough to get other writing assignments, I might consider going freelance full time, but it's not in the immediate future.

PAT: *Best of all possible worlds, chance of a lifetime, what characters, what ideas would you like to pursue in comics?*

HOWARD: I think I'm doing it now. I really enjoy it. I've had a couple of other offers, but I want to concentrate on GHOST RIDER, make it better than it is. Best of all possible worlds, GHOST RIDER will continue and improve as a book as I improve as a writer.

"Comics sold in Mexico total 1.5 billion per

RÉMY BASTIEN

Mexico, in January, has many things to offer. But high on the list of sun-seeking "norté americanos" is warmth! Not only does the sun shine brighter and longer, but the warmth of the people penetrates even the horrendous smog of Mexico City. High in the Valley of Mexico (Vallé de Anahuac) at 7340 feet lies this urban development of 600 square miles — the largest city in the world! — home to over 18 million people, many millions of them comic-book readers.

Mexico City is also home to Rémy Bastien van der Meer, and it was here, on a sun-seeking sojourn south, in the Galeria Plaza Hotel, in the famous Zona Rosa (Pink Zone), that we met Rémy, who has been involved in the comics field — one way or another — most of his life. Rémy sometimes takes time out from editing SPIDER-MAN, CONAN, and several other Mexican titles to write specialized "fumetti" or comics titles of his own.

Here in part one of this most informative interview, we learn from Rémy the lowdown on the Mexican comics scene, and we invite you to join us now south of the border . . .

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT: *You mentioned writing a piece for COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE. Have you done that?*

RÉMY BASTIEN: I've written it, I'm polishing it, and it's going to go out one of these days. Basically, I did a brief overview of the present scene in Mexico. How the economic crisis which started in many third-world countries in 1982 has affected the comics industry to the present. And then an overview of the big three in Mexico, which are Vid (which means vine), EJEA (which stands for the names of four brothers), and Novedades. You must take into account that in Mexico there are no industry trade journals. There is no COMICS INTERVIEW, there is no COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE, there is no COMICS JOURNAL. There are no reliable statistics printed once or twice a year, it's not compulsory to state print runs and/or sales, so it's very hard to get real figures on what is happening. But these three companies are undoubtedly the three *big* publishers in Mexico.

DAK: *Are there others?*

RÉMY: There are quite a few. I'd say there are three or four medium-sized publishers, and maybe 15 to 20 small publishers. Novedades has been going since 1942, Vid has been going since 1955, and EJEA has been going for 20 years under different guises and names. They regrouped and disbanded and separated, but they've been in the business for 20 years producing comic books without interruptions. And then you have the medium-size companies, and then you have the smaller companies with more-or-less success depending upon the product they put out. Some companies are almost one-man companies.

One such is owned by one of Mexico's top creators, **Gabriel Vargas.** He created the comic book called THE BURRON FAMILY. It's about a working-class family, the father, the mother, three children, and an assortment of secondary characters, and they all live in tenements. This comic book has been a running commentary for 40 years on Mexican life in the working class, on politics, on the economy, on mores and traditions, on everything from teenage daughter problems to husband and wife strife to the way the economy impacts on the working-class family. And it goes off into fantasy, it goes off into humorous horror — these are *cartoon* figures —

DAK: *It sounds like a Mexican LOVE AND ROCKETS.*

RÉMY: I would say more like a Mexican LI'L ABNER, maybe, or like a Mexican BRINGING UP FATHER, or a Mexican BLONDIE. It's a cartoon style. One of my favorites.

JULIA R. MATHER: *It's in the newspapers?*

RÉMY: No, it's a comic book that's

year. Comics here is a national pastime."

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Rémy Bastien

Born: 14 July 1947 — Mexico City

Occupation: Editor, writer, reader, translator.

Edits: SPIDER-MAN; SPIDER-MAN PRESENTS (an umbrella title); SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN; IMMORTAL NOVELS (a Mexican son of CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED magazine); JEWELS OF LITERATURE (the same idea but in color); and MEN AND HEROES (biographies and historical events).

Accomplishment Takes Most Pride In: I am particularly happy with the work I have done in social communication using the comic-book approach, such as a photonovel using the fumetti format I made in Nigeria, on family planning; I really liked that because I had fun and I think I made it an entertaining comic book, and it served its purpose.

Favorite Comic Books: Definitely, Will Eisner, just about everything he does; the first stuff that Jack Kirby and Stan Lee did; the European Westerns like BLUEBERRY; I think there are some interesting experiments going on presently in the U.S.; and I admire Alan Moore for the scope of universal culture he brings to comic books. I could go on and on . . .

Favorite Books: My tastes range from the classics, which I have to live with every day because it's part of my work, to Dashiell Hammett to science fiction to poetry, and I read a lot of best-sellers. For me the best way to relax is to read, but not comic books (this is a job hazard).

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published weekly. And it's gone from the size of COMICS INTERVIEW with some 96 pages to 32 pages now, due to the economic crisis. It's one of Mexico's longest-running comics. It *has* been published in Sunday comics supplements — I can't remember which newspaper. But that's one of the *small* comics publishers.

JULIA: *Do they just publish that?*

RÉMY: Just the one; it's a one-comic, one-family business. But in general the Mexican comics scene is very diversified

— I think it has more commercial diversity than the U.S. publishing scene. The total of comic books sold in Mexico is supposed to be approximately 1.5 billion comic books per year. It is a vague figure, though.

DAK: *It rivals McDonalds.* (Laughter.)

RÉMY: 1.5 billion units sold per year, and these units are sold through 55,000 or 60,000 newsstands throughout the country. And the comic books go from licensed products like SPIDER-MAN or SUPERMAN or BATMAN to made-in-Mexico comics that have been running for 40 years, such as FAMILIA BURRON or MEMIN PINGUIN. He's a Negro character about 11 years old who is in grade school and has all these adventures with his family and his friends, but mainly human interest stories. This is one of Mexico's most *successful* titles of all time, published by Vid and written by **Yolanda Vargas Dulché** (no relation to **Gabriel Vargas**). She is one of Mexico's most *recognized* authors.

And then in Mexico you have a lot of *genre* comics — cowboy, police, romance, terror and, most recently, very popular comics which deal with specific trades. There's a comic book on taxicab drivers, there's a comic book on truck drivers, there's a comic book on bricklayers, and related trades, so you have one issue dealing with an electrician who gets a romance going with a housewife whose electric wiring needs repairing. And the next issue will be with a bricklayer. And the next issue will deal with a plumber. These, apparently, are selling very briskly. Most of these are from EJEA. EJEA has consciously separated itself from the rest of the market creating these authentically "made-in-Mexico, by Mexicans, for Mexicans" comic books aimed at the greater part of the public, the working class.

Now, also in Mexico you have the photonovel, the fumetti — which is on its way out. It's been on its way out for the past ten years, and the end is now close. The fumetti as we know it originated in Italy, and it was *extremely* successful in Mexico with sales of over 350,000 per week — 500,000 even. But now the best-seller is probably doing 22,000 per issue, they're on the brink of extinction. We also have an unsavory sector in the comics industry which publishes semi-pornographic fumetti and semi- or pornographic comic books. Many of these are published without an indicia, and if you buy one off the newsstand in its little plastic bag — which is as far as the censorship goes in this area, with a little splash on the cover that will say "For Sale To Adults Only", you won't find the name of the publisher or the editor, just the cover price and the title, that's it. These are mainly illegal movements within the distribution system. No returns, advance sale . . . how do you call it, "sale in full"?

DAK: *Yeah.*

RÉMY: So, really, the spectrum is very, very wide. But the norm is a low cover

"Mexican comic books are sold for 500 to

600 pesos — that's less than a U.S. quarter."

price. The standard Mexican comic book is being sold for 500 to 600 pesos, which is less than a U.S. quarter. The most popular format is digest size, like the digests in the U.S. The standard page count is 96. There are many comics printed in one ink — it may be green, it may be purple, it may be sepia — but now mostly, the tendency is toward color, four-color separation. This movement was started in the digest format by Novedades at the end of the '70s, and most editors are imitating it.

Another important change in *recent* comics is the gradual disappearance of the continuing story. Most comic books, most *successful* comic books today, are one-shot stories. In a cowboy comic book each issue will be a different story with completely different characters, unrelated completely one to the other. In character comic books like EL PANTERA (THE PANTHER), who is a one-time bad buy turned policeman turned private detective — definitely a good guy now — each issue will be a one-shot story featuring a different adventure with this character. Continuing stories have been disappearing due in part to the economic crisis, according to marketing studies that have been done. Since their purchasing power has been notably decreased, people cannot keep up with a continuing comic that may go on for two years, like a good soap opera. And also, according to a marketing survey done by a psychologist, people want their fun right now. They want their entertainment *immediately* and once and for all. They don't want to wait for the cliff-hanger resolution next week, they want their vicarious thrills complete. That's more-or-less a very brief panorama of what's going on in Mexican comics right now.

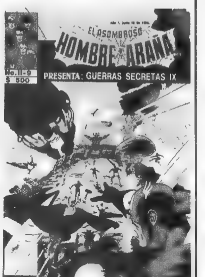
DAK: *To put this into perspective, when we first met you at the San Diego Comics Convention, in 1988, you were lamenting the falling sales in Mexican comics. We said, "Well, what are sales down to?" I think, if I remember right, you said, "Oh, they're down to some 600,000 on SPIDER-MAN and down from 1,200,000 to 850,000 for the best-selling cowboy title."*

RÉMY: Right.

DAK: *Sales that most any comics publisher would love to have in the United States. Everywhere we've travelled in Mexico, I see a newsstand on every single street corner, and every little store that sells publications has lots and lots of comic books. Yesterday I walked around Mexico City and saw people just sitting on their doorsteps, on the stoop, and each and every one was reading a comic book. This is what publishers of comic books in the United States have dreamed of — how do you get this kind of market saturation?*

RÉMY: Six, seven years ago you had comic books that were selling 1,200,000 copies per issue per *week*. In '88 they were down to about 600,000, they are now down to about 550,000, and apparently now they're on a plateau. As far as SPIDER-MAN is concerned, the best sales in this third time around for SPIDER-MAN in Mexico were in the vicinity of 80,000 a week. I really doubt that any licensed product, be it from the United States or Japan or from Spain or from Chile or from France, has ever really reached the sales that made-in-Mexico products have reached. This is understandable because Mexico has its own idiosyncrasies and the comics made by Mexicans for Mexicans are more in tune with the Mexican psyche than any foreign product. Reading comics is like a national pastime here.

But about 80,000 for SPIDER-MAN was excellent sales, years ago. It has gone down now due to the prices, but overall I think that the total volume of comics for the Mexican industry is pretty much the same as it was two or four or six years ago. What has happened is that as readers leave the market and others come in, the readership has more-or-less maintained. There might be a decrease of some percent of the total amount of readers, but also there is a bigger diversity. Perhaps due to the economic situation, to the stress that the working



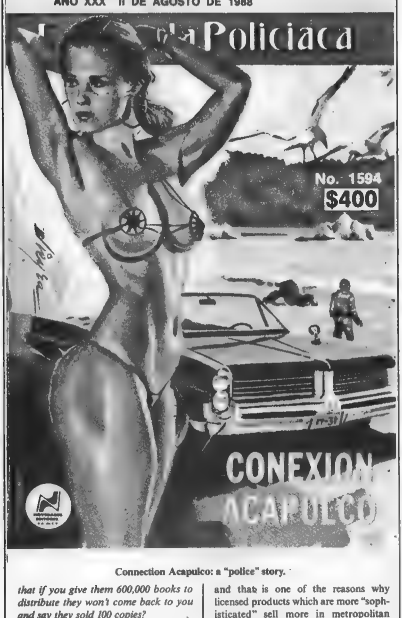
class is under, they are now buying more unsavory products — to put it that way — than your standard comic book, and new comics constantly appear.

DAK: *You have to guess at the figures, there being no official statistics?*

RÉMY: There are no official statistics. There is no law in Mexico that obliges the editor to specify sales even once a year, as you see in American comics where they state the average amount of issues sold per month, or the total issues sold per year. So, every editor that works in one of the big three, for instance, knows what his company is selling, and some information seeps through from the distributors, and there is a bit of "industrial espionage" going on. And also just from looking at a newsstand you can extrapolate. If you have a magazine that's selling 600,000 and your average issue count at a given newsstand is 50, then you see something from the competition and they've also got 50 there for the week, you can estimate that they're selling approximately the same. So the distributors act like a filter for all of the companies, all the competitors, and this is more-or-less how we can reach figures. Every now and then some government office will publish statistics, but they are not based on accounts from the companies.

DAK: *Well, this is a problem in the United States, and it may even be a bigger problem in Mexico — when you're dealing with a product such as comic books, where instead of physical returns mere affidavit statements have been substituted, how do you keep the distributors honest? How do you know*

"Any magazine here in Mexico that has



Connection Acapulco: a "police" story.

that if you give them 600,000 books to distribute they won't come back to you and say they sold 100 copies?

RÉMY: This is handled in a different way than the U.S. For a standard made-in-Mexico comic book, distribution works like this, give or take five to ten points on a 100 percent basis: 20 to 30 percent of the total print run will be distributed in Mexico City and outlying metropolitan area, the other percent will be distributed throughout the country. The main sales are throughout the country, say 75 percent in the states and 25 percent metropolitan area. Going off on a tangent, the main market for Mexican comic books is in the provinces, and that is one of the reasons why licensed products which are more "sophisticated" sell more in metropolitan areas. A farmer will not identify with a superhero as he will identify with a cowboy or with a cab driver or with a trucker, or with a made-in-Mexico character. That's more in tune with his everyday life than Superman or Spider-Man.

But for the distribution, the Mexican industry works on the basis of returns, and returns *are* physically delivered back to the publisher. So, of course, there is an elaborate accounting system. For instance, Novedades works with about 50 or 60 principal distributors throughout the country, so each distributor will receive his allotment per issue for the week, and the idea is to keep returns within the 10 to 20 percent figure. A magazine in Mexico that has *above* 20 percent returns is in *trouble*. Ten percent is reasonable, and below ten percent is fine. No returns is no good because then you can't gauge your market — a certain amount of returns is good. But the system, which is mainly through land freight, trucking and train, and in some cases air freight, is so structured that Novedades and other publishers will physically receive the magazines back. Or, years ago, I believe there were agreements in which the returns would be sold for a lower price or would be destroyed. In case they are destroyed then the covers were sent back to the publisher — the rest of the comic book was recycled into cheap paper.

DAK: *Does the publisher pay for the shipping, or does the distributor?*

RÉMY: It may be a 50/50 proposition, but if the distributor is very far away, most probably they will reach an agreement for a sale in a second market, or to be recycled, or to be used for promotions, like with this week's issue we'll give away an issue that was printed six months back. Or they will tie in a cowboy title with a police title to help the readers to get to know the cowboy title.

DAK: *Do you package them together, then?*

RÉMY: We stick them together with soft, transparent plastic glue so you can separate the two comic books without damaging the covers.

JULIA: *One of the things that we noticed as we travelled around Mexico — we have purchased the English newspaper called THE NEWS — is that we have paid from 700 pesos here in Mexico City to as much as 4,000 pesos, for the same paper. Does the price change depending upon the area, or do they just sell it for what they feel like?*

RÉMY: Well, I think it's a little bit of both. As far as I know the cover price is obligatory in the metropolitan area, but the price does go up elsewhere because of the air freight — because it's a newspaper it has to be shipped by air to outlying points in the country. But also there might be a little bit of just plain price increasing on the part of the vendor. I don't think the sales manager would be very happy to hear that. *(Laughter.)* I don't think that's really right, it being sold at 4,000 pesos in some parts of the country.

DAK: *One last question on the business side: Did I understand you right, that*

above 20% returns is in a lot of trouble."

sometimes things are recirculated, for example that the returns might be shipped to another area and distributed there?

RÉMY: Yes, sometimes, especially from cities which are relatively close to Mexico City. It's like this: the truck leaves with five tons of comic books to go to Guadalajara; on his way back he'll bring the returns; then the returns will be used for promotions *from* Mexico City, or sometimes they will be stuck onto this week's issue right in the cities which are further away. By the way, I believe there's also a deal with some distributors in which the distributor accepts a ten percent return amount and that's it, so he'll use his extra returns for promotions of his own.

JULIA: *He basically guarantees a 90 percent sale?*

RÉMY: Yes, that's what I've heard, a 90 percent sale — so there is a little bit of risk on his part.

DAK: *I'm sure there are drawbacks, but this sounds like an excellent system compared to the one that we have.*

RÉMY: Well, this system is basically the system that has been used by all the main publishers in Mexico, independently of deals that may be struck between smaller publishers and some distributors. You will have some publishers that only distribute their product in Mexico City — they are so small they can't afford to reach the nationwide distribution system. But the big three all work within this framework.

And what is also important is that each of the big three companies have their own basic distribution networks. In Mexico City distribution is compulsory through the Union of Newspaper Vendors, that's an unwritten law — or maybe it's a *written* law, I couldn't tell. But that's the way it works in Mexico City, you have to distribute through the Union of Newspaper Vendors. Outside of Mexico City and the metropolitan area there are nationwide distributors, very big names but basically each of the big three has its own network which it combines with local, regional and nationwide distributors. So it's funny, that each of the big three publishers has had to set up its own distribution network.

JULIA: *And that covers your own warehouses, trucking —*

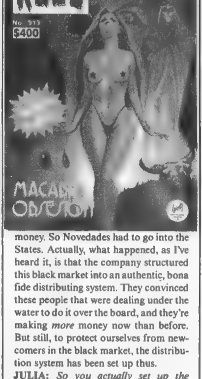
RÉMY: That covers trucking, warehouses, accounting, invoicing. We have distributors in some of the biggest cities that *only* distribute our products. We have distributors who distribute *any* kind of products who also carry our catalog; they work that way with other publishers also. No publisher is strictly a distributor of his own product. There are other magazines, music magazines, sports magazines, wrestling magazines, which are distributed by comics distributors.

DAK: *I must be remembering from a previous conversation with you, something about how some of your comics are distributed in Chicago or someplace first, and then they come to Mexico City?*

RÉMY: Right. The percentage of the comics we publish that is distributed in the United States is low, it's maybe two or three percent of the total print run. But our comic books *are* sold in California, in Texas, in Miami, in Chicago — basically in all Spanish-speaking areas of the U.S. To avoid contraband the distribution system has been set up in this way. Let's talk of a given issue, which is #400. When issue #400 is on sale in Chicago, Miami, Texas and California, right over the border on the Mexican side, like in Tijuana, issue #399 will be on sale. Further towards the center of the country issue #398 will be on sale. The reason for this is that ten or twelve years ago people in the U.S. would just cross over the border, fill up the car trunk with 500 copies of that week's issue, cross over the border and sell for $1.00 comics that they bought in Mexico for a quarter. Now, the issue on sale in Mexico, just over the border, has *already* been sold, a week or two before, in the U.S., making the former system of contraband inoperative.

DAK: *Sounds like a fairly good way to make money.*

RÉMY: A fairly easy way to make money. So Novedades had to go into the States. Actually, what happened, as I've heard it, is that the company structured this black market into an authentic, bona fide distributing system. They convinced these people that were dealing under the water to do it over the board, and they're making *more* money now than before. But still, to protect ourselves from newcomers in the black market, the distribution system has been set up thus.



JULIA: *So you actually set up the distribution there with the people that had been —*

RÉMY: Black marketing. That's a curious thing, but that's the way I was told it happened, many years ago. By the way, years ago, when continuing comics were the rage, you actually had people drive from Mexico City to some town two hours away to buy the next week's comic book, in "advance" and figure out the cliffhanger.

There's one thing which I'd like to add. I remember people from the U.S. telling me that a comic book in the U.S. with 50 percent returns was business, good business. In Mexico if returns are above 20 percent, it's in danger. The whole structure of the distribution system, the financing and the economics, are totally different.

DAK: *Very,* very *different. This is a great generality, but if an American comics publisher is getting a 70 percent return, that means a 30 percent sell through on the newsstand, which is pretty much a breakeven point, and beyond that the publisher starts to make tiny bits of money. If I had a distributor guarantee me a 90 percent sell through, I'd have it made!* (Laughter.)

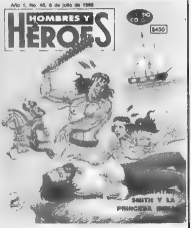
"Many adults become literate through comic books."

To switch over to the creative side, with this many comics being published, and most of them being self-contained stories, where is the impetus to produce new material? Obviously, a story about the old West is not going to be outdated five years from now — so is there a lot of reprinting of old material, or is most of this material new, and if so then why do they do the new material?

RÉMY: I would say that less than five percent of comic books on the stands today are reprints. Novedades has no reprints at all. EJEA has no reprints at all. Vid is reprinting some of its old terror comic books, and they repackage in trade paperback format at *very* cheap prices some of their most successful romantic continuing stories. This is a gimmick, if you will, because they will reprint, rebind, in trade paperbacks what was published in a continuing format over several years. But basically the reprint aspect of comic books is not very big business.

An *important* factor in the amount of sales in Mexico is — though we have best-selling children's titles, or family titles, if you will — that your standard Mexican comic book is geared to the adult population. Many adults *become* literate through comic books, and *maintain* their literacy through comic books. In many aspects I have felt that comic books in Mexico are the equivalent of the paperback book in the U.S. You get people out in the country who will read five or six comic books a week, and this is the equivalent of reading a MIKE HAMMER or a historical romance or a DESTROYER book. So, the main market is not the children. As a matter of fact, from '82 to date — '82 being the year in which the economic crisis started — children's titles are the ones that have suffered the most. Adult titles have fallen in sales maybe 40 or 50 percent, but companies put out new titles to make up for their loss. A publisher will say: "My cowboy title is selling 500 less, but I put out this trucker title which is selling 400, so I'm almost back in volume to where I was before."

Now, the impetus for new titles: There is a turnover, and there are cycles. For instance, romance comics seem to be on the decline now, but cowboy comics are still strong. Police comics seem to be a standard. So companies that see their total volume decreasing have to put out new titles to maintain their market share and their volume. If we're selling so many million comics a week and our sales have decreased by one million, we have to put out one or two or three titles to make up for that. Now, the way the companies decide *which* product to put out is a process which involves the managers, the sales people, and the editors — basically



Made in Mexico, for Mexicans.

the editors. The editors will come up with the ideas, which they will present to general management, to sales management. These ideas will be shuffled about, polished, created and launched.

Right now there's a different thrust from each company in the market. EJEA has been publishing two to three new titles every year for the past three years. Vid has published *more* titles. Novedades has not published very much new product in the past few years, and at this time is under new management. Take into account also that Novedades is not strictly a comic-book publishing company — it also publishes newspapers, VOGUE magazine in Spanish, sports magazines. But comic books — this is important — comic books are perhaps the cheapest form of entertainment in Mexico, barring radio or TV. (Once a person has paid for his radio, paid for his TV, then he has to pay only for his electricity.) Comic books are the cheapest form of entertainment at 18 or 20 U.S. cents apiece. That accounts for the estimated 1.5 billion sales a year.

DAK: *We're going the other way in the States now, we have comics at $3.00 and $10.00 with sales of ten copies.* (Laughter.)

RÉMY: In Mexico there is also another factor: most comic books are weekly. In the U.S. most comic books are monthly. In the U.S. the comics industry has created a fantastic infrastructure, has created conventions, collectables, comics shops, media events, and fandom. In Mexico, comic books are still very much "use it and throw it away" items. Comic books are cheaper in Mexico the older they are, instead of becoming more expensive. There is really no organized fandom, there is no OVERSTREET COMIC BOOK PRICE GUIDE. It's not like stamps where certain stamps increase in value. Comic books are bought in Mexico on a Monday, read, maybe thrown in the garbage or maybe piled up with the old newspapers and sold off by weight — or traded-in at used-comics stores, or even *rented*. In little towns I have seen people in the plaza on Sunday renting comic books. They will rent a comic book for a nickel, and you will see three or four kids get together and go and rent SPIDER-MAN and sit down and read it, and then they return it. So the outlook, the relation between the product and the reader, is completely different in Mexico from the U.S.

NEXT ISSUE: In part two, Rémy gives us an inside view on his personal career in writing, editing, storyboarding, even photographing nudes, for comics, TV, radio, advertising, academia, and back to comics . . .

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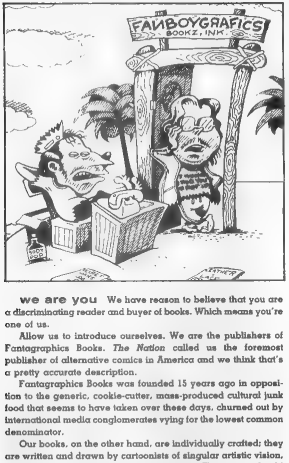
WHAP!
SLAP!



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—Gary Groth and Kim Thompson

Illustration from "Prisoners of Hate Island," *Hate #*1 (see p. 10).
Design: Linda Owens

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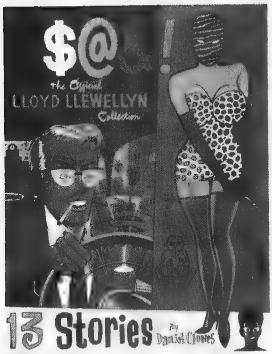
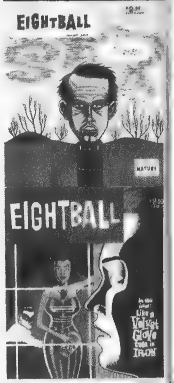
DAN Clowes





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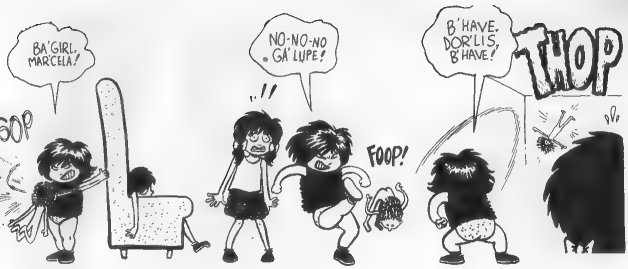


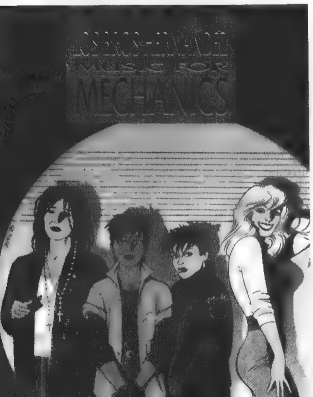
LOVE & ROCKETS

Now in its ninth year, *Love & Rockets* is the magazine that "set the standard for the art of the adult comic book" (*Publishers Weekly*). The ongoing series of book collections available here reprints its entire run. Each volume contains stories by Jaime & Gilbert Hernandez, both masters of the their form and yet stylistically distinct from one another. Jaime's "Mechanics" and "Las Locas" focus on the exploits of Maggie, Hopey and other denizens of post-punk L.A. while Gilbert's "Heartbreak Soup" chronicles the lives of the residents in the fictional Central American town of Palomar. . . . "The ground-breaking comic book of the decade" (*The Face*). . . . "Never before have comic books produced such strong cumulative effects" (*L.A. Herald-Examiner*).

5

Hernandez

JAIME & GILBERT



1991 CALENDAR

Features 12 new full-page illustrations by Jaime & Gilbert plus scads of new little drawings and esoteric dates to remember.

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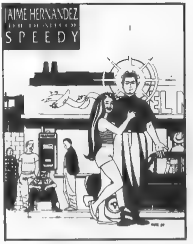

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Hernandez

GILBERT & JAIME

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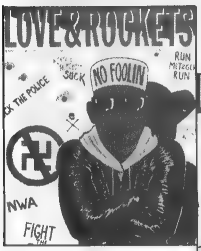

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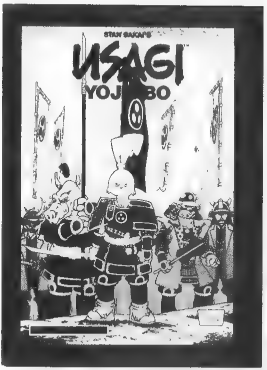

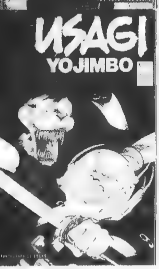

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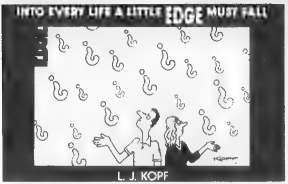

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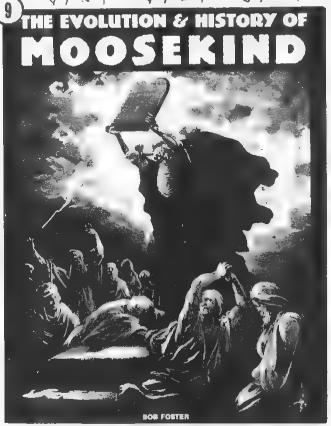

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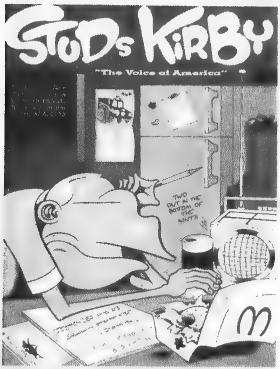

PETER BAGGE T-SHIRT

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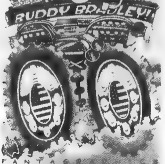

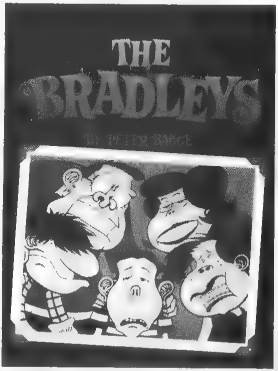

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JUNIOR AND OTHER LOSERS

These tales, culled from the pages of the acclaimed comic book *Neat Stuff* and R. Crumb's anthology *Weirdo*, spotlight some of Bagge's best-loved characters: Junior, the Oedipally fixated nerd; Zoove Groover, the forgotten rock 'n' roll star; Chet and Bunny Leeway, the smugly desperate suburbanites; and others. Don't blame us if any of these stories hit too close to home! 136 pp.

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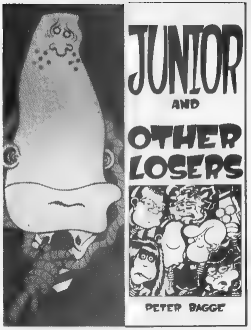
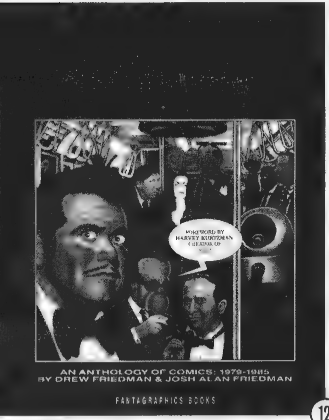


Friedman

DREW & JOSH ALAN



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Spy regular Drew Friedman teams up with his brother Josh Alan on these hilarious and totally untrue anecdotes about show biz losers. This first collection of their work brought on more than one libel suit (none of which got far) and contains twice as much material as their latest hit book *Warts and All.* 120 pp. ®

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Kaz

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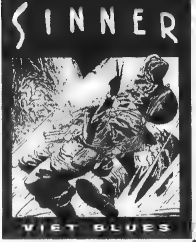

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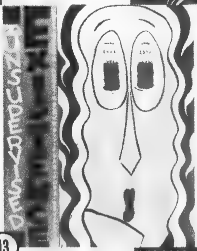

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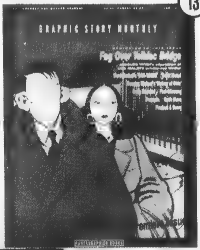

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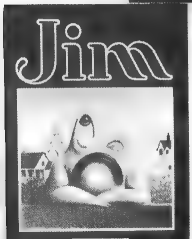

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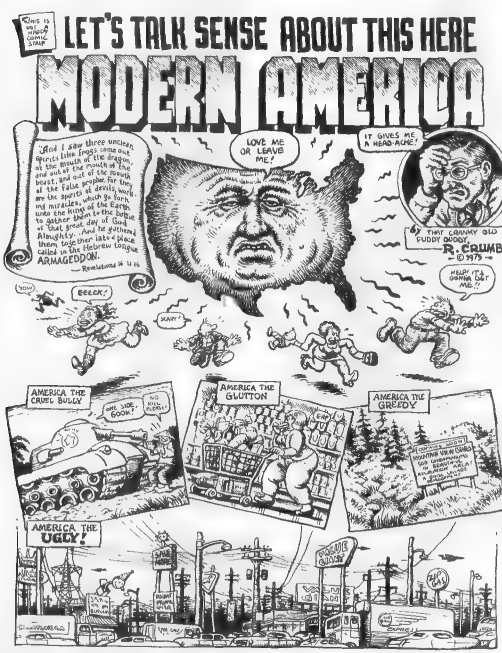
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Kominsky-Crumb

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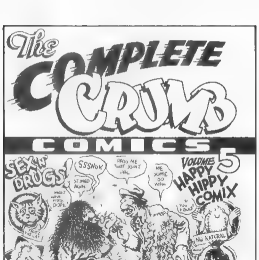

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ROBERT **Crumb**

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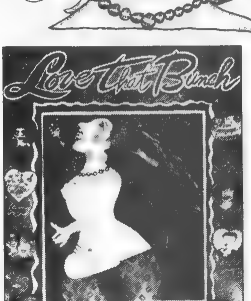

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The reigning queen of comics (and wife to R. Crumb), Aline Kominsky-Crumb, shows off the best work of her career. The autobiographical subject matter ranges from angst about her life to angst about other things. But the humor and insight which pervades her art and writing are what ultimately make these stories authentic and resonant. 128 pp. ®

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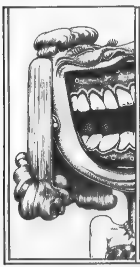

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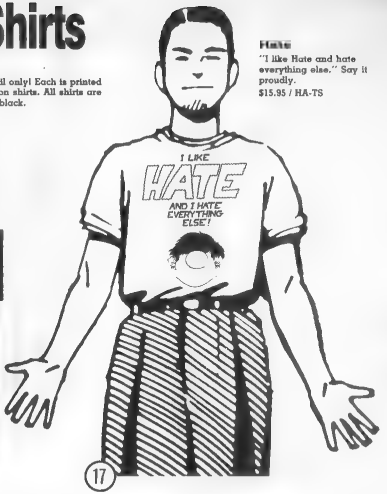

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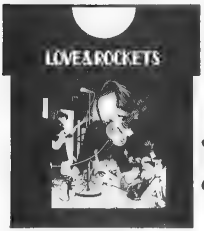

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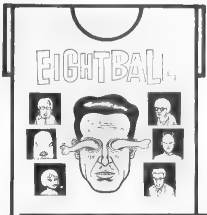

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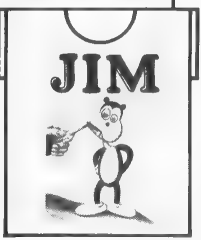
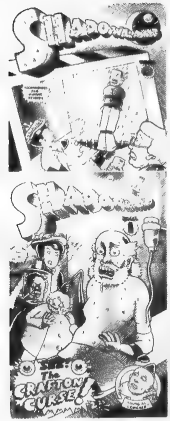


KIM Deitch



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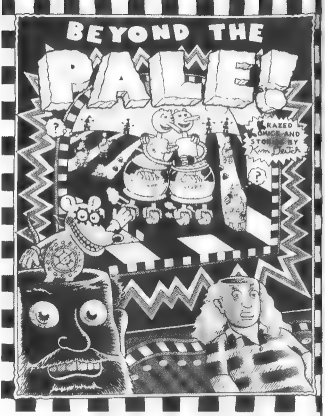

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Old Hollywood and its survivors are the focus of this horror/comedy serial which was originally printed in the *L.A. Reader*. Deitch's longest work to date, *Hollywoodland* is packed with so many twisty plotlines and oddball characters it makes *Twin Peaks* look dull by comparison. Afterword by Deitch. 80 pp.

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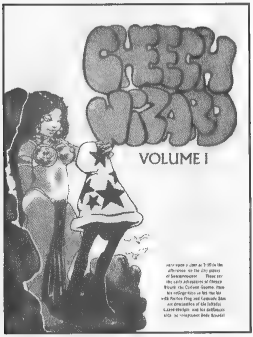

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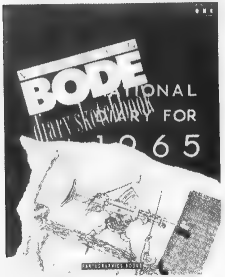

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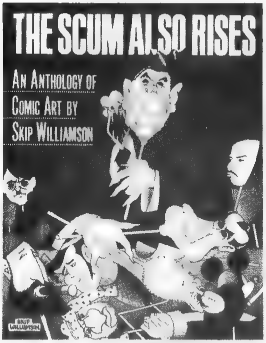

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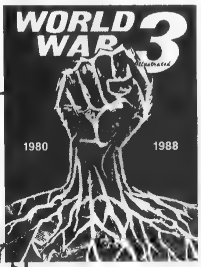

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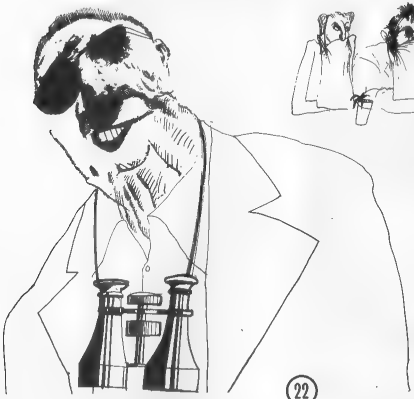

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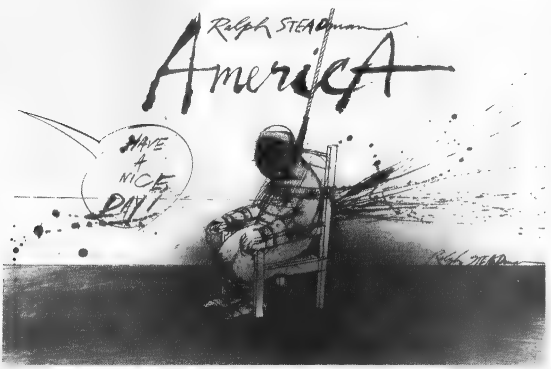

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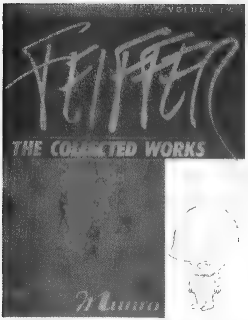

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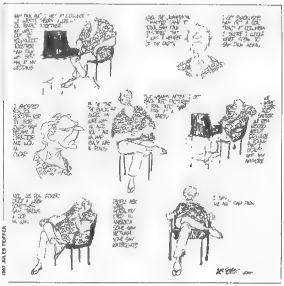

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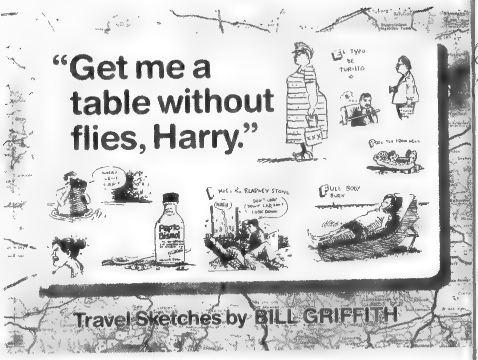

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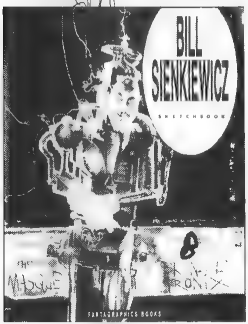
I AM INTRODUCED TO A POPULAR BREAKFAST CEREAL IN IRELAND
PINHEAD OATMEAL
DELICIOUS WITH JUST A SOUPSON OF TACO SAUCE...
I CANNOT TELL A LIE
THAT SALMAN RUSHDIE IS ONE PLUCKY BASTARD
AT TOMEY'S PUB BAGGOT RD., DUBLIN
TWO GUARDS at the NATIONAL GALLERY
HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT PADDY O'DOOLIN?
PASSED AWAY. THEY'VE GOT HIM LYING IN THE DEAD ROOM.
SHE WORE BLOOD VELVET.
TWO GIRLS SINGING the SAME SONG OVER and OVER at the STAG'S HEAD

ZIPPY'S FAVORITE INDITO VALLARTA HOT SPOT..
SOAK, RINSE, SPIN!!!
loma del mar
lavanderia automatica
WORRIED? WHAT'S TO WORRY ABOUT.
I'M WORRIED THAT I'M NOT WORRYING ABOUT ANYTHING

BILL Sienkiewicz



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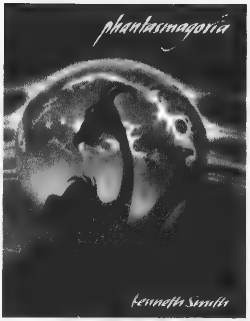

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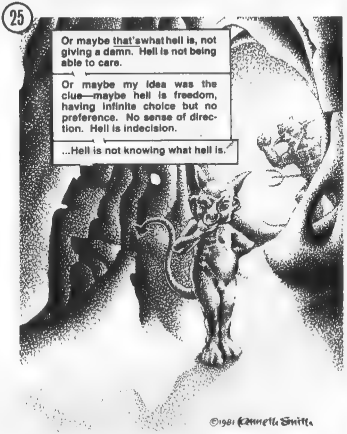
25
Or maybe that'swhat hell is, not giving a damn. Hell is not being able to care.
Or maybe my idea was the clue—maybe hell is freedom, having infinite choice but no preference. No sense of direction. Hell is indecision.
...Hell is not knowing what hell is.
©1981 Kenneth Smith

KENNETH **Smith**

FOSTER

HAL Foster

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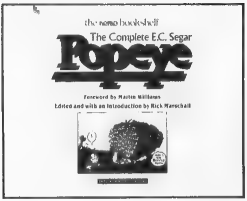
the new bookshelf
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Popeye
Foreword by Maxine Williams
Edited and with an Introduction by Rick Marschall

E. C. Segar

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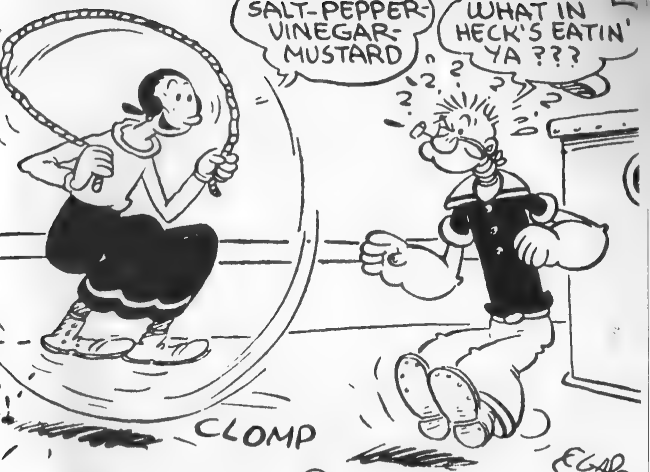

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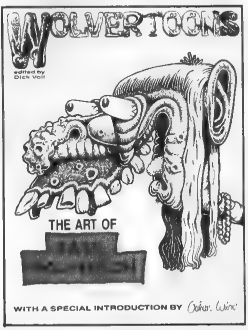
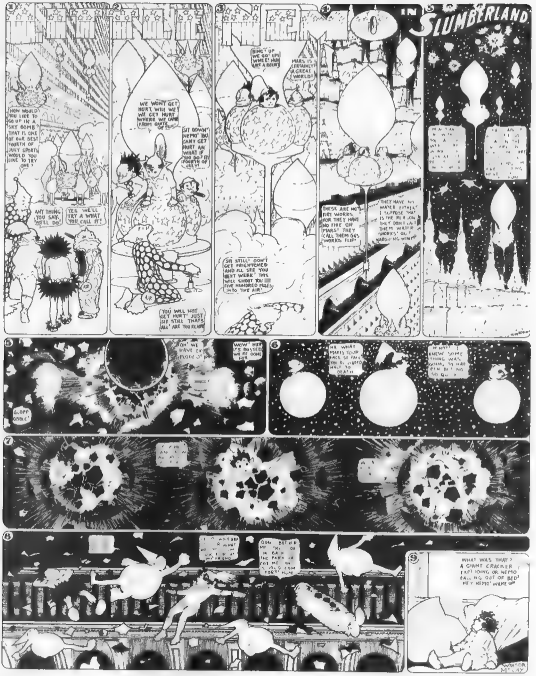


BASIL **Wolverton**



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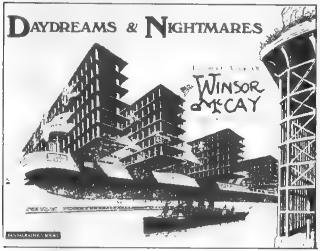

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LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND

Few, if any, cartoonists can touch Winsor McCay in terms of his output, influence, and innate skill. Not only is he regarded as the father of animation, but his newspaper strip "Little Nemo" is arguably the best comic ever. These lavish full-color volumes assemble for the first time a complete reprinting of Nemo from 1905 to 1911 reproduced exactly as the pages first appeared. 100 pp each.

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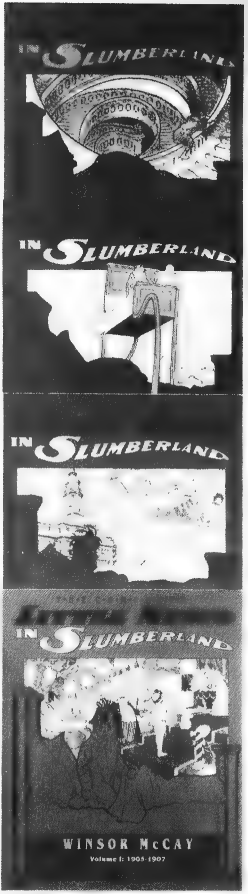

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"The strange villains were great, then the *gore* to top it off."

ROD RAMOS

BARRY DUTTER: *So, Rodney, how did you first get involved with THE TOXIC AVENGER?*

RODNEY RAMOS: At the time I was looking for some work and **Jim Salicrup** was looking for an artist for TOXIC AVENGER. He figured he would try me out, and he approached me with the project. He explained the whole thing, that it had been this cult favorite movie of the superhero from underground who was turned into this guy who goes around beating up on evil, and he was basically created by the villains themselves in a sense. I was really excited about it. He let me look at the two tapes that he had, the first and second movies, and I really got into the whole *idea* of the character, and the whole *concept*. Just the strange villains were great, and then the *gore* to top it off, it had the whole exciting part about drawing that stuff.

BARRY: *Had you heard of the character before?*

ROD: I had never heard about the character before except for maybe seeing some ads about it, movie listings — it's been around awhile, it seems to be a cult favorite for midnight showings and stuff.

Photo: Janet Jackson

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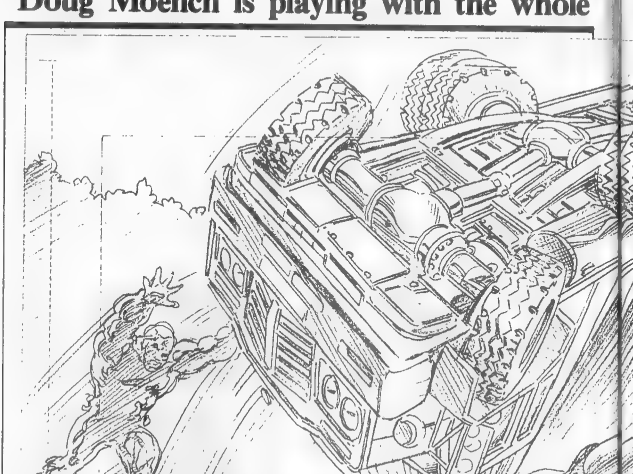
"Doug Moench is playing with the whole



I heard some people saying, "It's great, it's great, you gotta see it!" But I never really bothered.

BARRY: *So, the first thing you did was you watched the tapes?*

ROD: The first thing I did, actually, was . . . actually, I *did* watch the tapes first, and I had the script at the same time. The script, the first plot, was being revised, so I basically did see the movies first. And it was really *wild!* I couldn't believe what they were doing: "Oh, my God, this is *strange!*" The thing I loved about it was that comic-book feel it had to it, you know. The villains are just so strange. This little guy comes out, he's like a midget, and then he's squished into a basketball and slam-dunked into the hoop. *(Laughter.)* God.

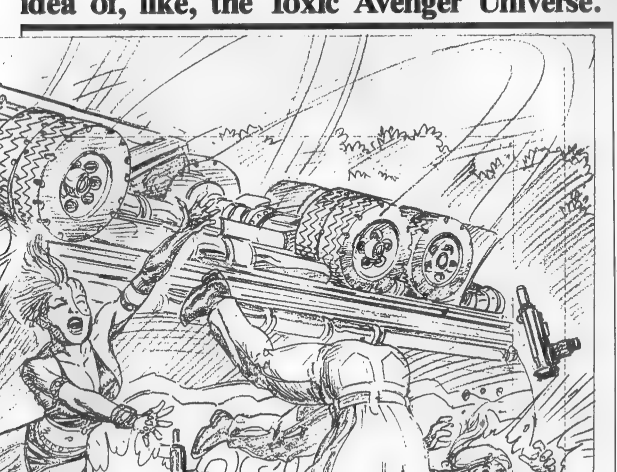
BARRY: *Will you be doing stuff like that in the comic book?*

ROD: Actually, we'll be doing stuff like that but a little bit more tame, I think. Like there's one sequence in the first issue where this guy gets punched in the face and the face just caves in like clay and I have his eye basically sticking out. And I have some other stuff happening to people, and occasionally I'll have an eyeball rolling down, popping out somewhere. I'm trying to get away with stuff like that, but I think the blood will be — 'cause I don't know if there's a Code on the book or not — it'll be tame, you know. We won't show it as much, but we'll get into gore there. We'll get into it eventually.

BARRY: *It sounds like you're having some fun with the graphics on it.*

ROD: Yeah, I am. You get that sadistic feeling, like you take out all your aggression on these people: "Yeah, I woulda *liked* to have done *this* to somebody some time or another." Strange stuff like that

idea of, like, the Toxic Avenger Universe."



BARRY: *So, Doug Moench is the writer on this?*

ROD: Doug Moench, who I've wanted to work with for awhile, in fact I was going to approach him on some SHANG-CHI stuff 'cause I *loved* what he was doing on that book. I loved that character a lot, so I was actually going to do up a proposal, like do some sketches and throw an idea or two at him. And all of a sudden TOXIC AVENGER popped up and it was **Doug Moench!** I was going, "**Doug Moench,** I'm working with **Doug Moench!**" So that was kind of nice.

BARRY: *And how do you find working with Doug so far?*

ROD: I find it okay. It's a little hard for me because I'm not used to working out certain sequences that he has: He gets *specific* about things because he has a lot of things going on. I like to get them all in there, but sometimes it's just hard, I've got to really concentrate and figure out the panels. Sometimes the actions that he has are described in smaller sequences.

BARRY: *What type of stories is Doug doing with this book?*

ROD: We're sticking to the movies in terms of the characters and what was there, but he's basically doing stories on his own. He's taken the whole idea from the movies and he's taking off on some tangents, you know, and trying to make some sense so that it works as a comic book. He's putting a storyline into it, bringing in the characters and stuff; he's playing with the whole idea of, like, the Toxic Avenger Universe. He's breaking away from the movie a bit by adding some more things to it, making it more clear, or taking things out, or making sure that the *gore* doesn't go *too* beyond or whatever. You never know how they're going to react from the Code. They'll see something: "Gee, we just don't like the

"Some of the villains, we'll exaggerate them even more."

fact that you have the guy's guts *rolling* across the floor like that in bright red." *(Laughter.)* I like the way he's handling it, it's kind of fun actually.

BARRY: *Who are some of the villains in the book?*

ROD: Well, next issue he's turned these gym guys in the gym into these super powered villains. Basically, they're affected by some chemicals and they're turned into these super wild muscular deformed characters, and these three guys are ingredible. I've still got to work them out, but that should be fun.

BARRY: *Are you trying for an exaggerated look for all the characters in the book?*

ROD: Well, there's *supposed* to be an exaggerated look to all the characters. In the first issue I was having some trouble trying to exaggerate the characters because I still hadn't gotten into the whole feel of the movie, and hopefully by the second issue I will have gotten a little bit more exaggerated. Right now I'm just a little nervous, I'm just trying to work through the first issue and get it done right, get it done on time. Hopefully by the second issue I'll be on such a roll that it'll go over and I'll have no problems working on the characters and stuff.

BARRY: *What kind of references did you have?*

ROD: Well, I had the posters and a whole bunch of promotional material that Jim gave me, and the movies themselves. I reference stuff from the movies, go to the VCR, because basically we're sticking to everything that's there, the town itself, the people that are there, the girls. Some of the villains, we'll exaggerate them even more. Basically, quite close, quite close. There are changes, but not that major.

BARRY: *Who are some of the main characters in the series?*

ROD: Well, there's the Toxic Avenger, of course. The school for the blind will always be there 'cause that's where his girlfriend Claire is. Then it rotates with our main villain, Ahrman — he's the main villain that runs the gym there — and then there's a more *evil* villain that we can't divulge yet that's roaming around. That's basically it for now except for the people that are running around the gym and stuff. Of course, there's Toxie's mother, who is *always* going to be there.

BARRY: *Like Aunt May.*

ROD: Aunt May, yes, the little Aunt May of TOXIC AVENGER. *(Laughter.)*

BARRY: *Are they doing an animated TOXIC AVENGER series, do you know anything about that?*

ROD: I've seen some stuff, some color cels and stuff, but I really don't know where they're going to go with that. That's up in the air. Supposedly there might be, but I don't know yet. I don't think they're going to have that type of gore in the animation. I know we have it in the comic books, to a point, but in the animation it will probably be your kiddie type stuff, they'll slam into a building and nothing will happen to them. If they did it it would be kind of funny, actually.

BARRY: *Now, the comic was originally supposed to be black and white, do you know anything about that?*

ROD: I don't really know about that. It might have been.

BARRY: *I think what Salierup wanted to do was a black-and-white gory violent comic based on the movies —*

ROD: Oh, right right right, sort of like a SAVAGE SWORD magazine where you can get away with lopping off heads and having guts spill out and stuff.

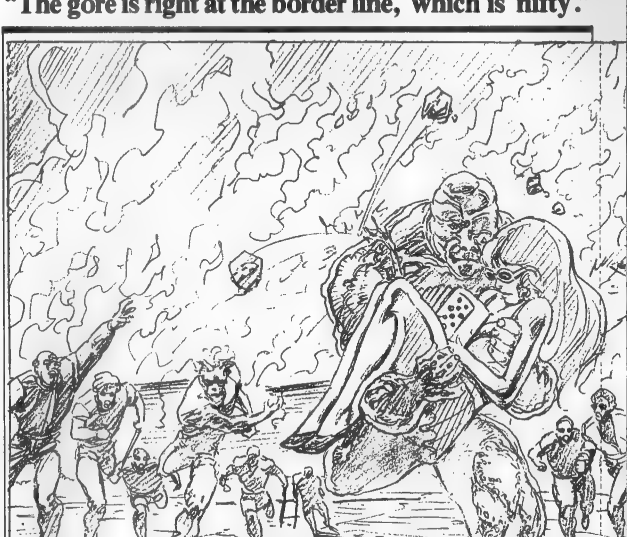
BARRY: *Right, because there's no Code approval on it.*

ROD: Right. Yeah, *that* would have been good!

BARRY: *And then* also *do the color comic based on the animated show.*

ROD: Right.

"The gore is right at the border line, which is nifty."



BARRY: *Now I think they're doing the color comic based on both.*

ROD: Yeah, combining both of them. They're keeping it safe, the gore is right at the border line, and then you got the color at the same time, which is a nifty format. It's on bleed paper and everything, so I can do a lot of bleed work and stuff, which is nice. The new "Daring" line of books.

BARRY: *I think he might be one of the "Tough Guys."*

ROD: Yeah, right right.

BARRY: *I don't know if that's the title they finally settled on.*

ROD: I don't know. I remember reading it in the retailers brochure that they sent out, they had it mapped out as to what they were going to put out in the year, and this was supposed to be the first segment of the year under some title.

BARRY: *Do you have any favorite characters in the book yet?*

ROD: Actually, I like Toxie himself. I just like the whole idea of here's this guy that's just burnt to a crisp running around, beating up on people, making

"For now I plan on sticking with TOXIC AVENGER,

basic *puns* about it, beating heads in, watching eyes roll out. His girlfriend's kind of funny because I get to draw this very sexy woman that's running around, so I kind of like both of them actually. And, of course, the villains. Any type of villain that comes in I just think, "Okay, what can I do with this guy to make him look really *goofy* and threatening at the same time?" It's a challenge.

BARRY: *What were you working on before you took over TOXIC AVENGER?*

ROD: I had just finished up the WHAT IF? X-MEN . . "What if the All-New X-Men Didn't Exist?" And projects before that, I had done an issue of CONAN, and I had worked for various other companies which I can't mention. *(Laughter.)*

BARRY: *You can, it's not a Marvel magazine.*

ROD: That's true. I had done stuff for Valiant Comics, I had done LEGEND OF ZELDA for awhile, and I had done stuff for Continuity for **Neal Adams,** did an issue of SAMUREE that came out recently. But for now I plan on sticking with TOXIC AVENGER, being responsible, and kind of keep my name out in the open so people can see me, make sure I get regular work and stuff.

BARRY: *How is TOXIC AVENGER different from your typical Marvel superhero book?*

ROD: Well, it's not an established character so you sort of psych yourself up in a different way. You're going, "Okay, here's all the material and you've put yourself into it, you can make up new things, you can develop new things, it's not set, it's not *established.*" If you're working with Spider-Man you're psyched up a different way because everything's established and you want to do something new, a new look on Spider-Man or a different approach on Spider-Man, but you're psyched for that traditional feel and that whole establishment of Spider-Man and the characters that are there. You already know what's going on; you already have a *sense* of how the character should look, how the book should *feel.* But with TOXIC AVENGER you can play around with it. You can make up a villain and nobody can say that's wrong, he shouldn't look like that; nobody can question it.

BARRY: *You have more freedom.*

ROD: Yeah, you basically have more freedom.

BARRY: *Are there any other projects you're working on right now that you want to mention?*

ROD: Right now, not really. I really want to stay just on this book for right now. Any other projects that pop up now are probably outside of the comic books field, some illustrations for books and stuff.

BARRY: *Do you do a lot of that type of work?*

ROD: Only now and then, basically my main focus is comic books. If a painting project does come up that I do, that's not going to interfere with TOXIC AVENGER.

BARRY: *Are you inking the book?*

ROD: I'm just pencilling the book, **Val Mayerik** is inking the book . . . I don't know who's coloring the book yet.

BARRY: *Have you worked with Val before?*

ROD: I've never worked with Val before. I've seen his stuff on STALKERS and a few other things, basically he's done Epic stuff.

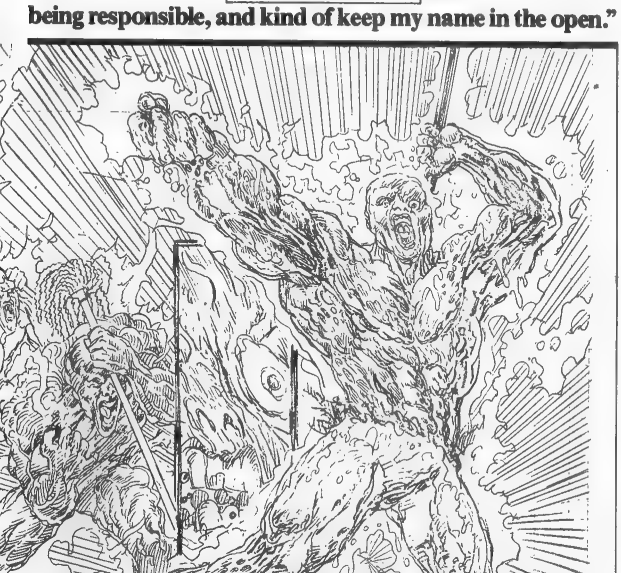
BARRY: *VOID INDIGO.*

ROD: I liked VOID INDIGO.

BARRY: *How do you like his inks over your pencils?*

ROD: Well, I've only seen the cover of MARVEL AGE so far and I liked the way he turned that out, nice and crisp. I want him to get a little more *grittiness* into it, but I think he'll catch onto that. But I really haven't seen anything so I can't really say much on that.

being responsible, and kind of keep my name in the open."



BARRY: *Have you met Doug Moench?*
ROD: I've *spoken* with **Doug Moench** but I've never really met him face to face. He seems like a nice guy. I always wanted to work with him.
BARRY: *And how do you like working with Jim Salicrup?*

ROD: Jim's funny, he's fun. He's very *casual*, which I like. If the book is late he'll remind you that it is late and you *have* to get the pages in, but he won't take a bat over your head, you know. And I want to stay on this book for quite awhile so I'll do my best to get the pages in and make it look good. I hope everybody will pick it up — pick it up, please please! *(Laughter.)*
BARRY: *Do you have any closing thoughts you'd like to add on TOXIE?*
ROD: Help, help, I'm drowning in toxic waste! *(Laughter.)*

"Roy Thomas used to really appreciate the

LEN WEIN

Len Wein is one of the most important members of the second wave of modern comics creators. The second wave came in the wake of the Stan Lee/Jack Kirby era, when young creators took over established characters or created new ones imbued with a new sensitivity.

Wein's stories in particular have dealt with such themes as isolation, failure, alienation and the need for acceptance. His creations include the tragic Swamp Thing, the hot-tempered Wolverine, and the embattled New X-Men. Writing comics had been a goal to Wein from the 8th grade on, and through reading them he made a lifelong friend. "Marv Wolfman and I met as kids through a letter column in MYSTERY IN SPACE!" He's had a distinguished run on just about every book this side of FLAMING CARROT, his favorite title being THE INCREDIBLE HULK. "The Hulk is such a primal, emotional character . . . I enjoyed HULK because I could do great human stories."

In person, the shaggy Wein gives off the boundless enthusiasm and supreme self-confidence of a hip college professor or rock 'n' roll D.J. His secret identity is betrayed only by the heart-shaped button on his left lapel, which displays the familiar visage of Spider-Man. For this interview, the affable writer goes into "Everything You Wanted To Know About The X-Men, But Were Afraid To Ask," as well as his encounters with such unusual creatures as muck monsters, masked men, mutants and Alan Moore . . .

PAT JANKIEWICZ: *Of your creations, who's your favorite:*

LEN WEIN: In terms of success, it would be Wolverine. The name was given to me by **Roy Thomas,** who was Marvel editor at the time. It's very weird — Roy used to really appreciate the way I'd do accents for different countries. When I did BROTHER VOODOO, a dumb series I had fun writing, he was crackers about my Jamaican accent, so he came to me and said "Look, I'd like to do a character called Wolverine." I said tell me about him. "Nothing, I've got a name and I just want to see what you can do with a Canadian accent!" *(Laughter.).*

John Romita designed the original visual of the costume. I made him a mutant because there were rumors going on that they might revive THE X-MEN as a BLACKHAWKS-type group of superhero-mutants. I figured it couldn't hurt to have a Canadian waiting around in the wings if we needed one. He's Canadian because wolverines are very big up there, you wouldn't get a wolverine in Miami!

PAT: *The arm-claws are an off-beat touch, and were borrowed by the NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET*

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way I do accents for different countries."

movies. Where'd they come from?

LEN: He changed dramatically. When I first designed the character, the claws were part of his gloves, so I was surprised when they started popping out of his arms, but his claws were always part of the character.

PAT: *Are you happy with what's been done with the character?*

LEN: I don't like the killing. Of course, it's part of what made him the most popular character at Marvel, so what do I know? I don't think a hero is necessarily a hero if he runs around killing people. What made Wolverine a hero in my stories was that his inclination was to kill you, but he restrained himself. That's a lot more heroic than someone who has the power and goes around using it all the time.

That inner-fight, to keep from ripping your guts out, is what made him a hero, but **Chris Claremont** found it easier to have him kill people. Who can argue?

PAT: *Did you have a goal in mind when you created the new X-Men?*

LEN: Pretty much the same thing as Wolverine. Roy came to me and said "It's about time, we're gonna do THE X-MEN, are you interested?" I said "Sure!" **Dave Cockrum** was very interested. Dave had a book that he used to keep, with costumed sketches, for dozens and dozens of characters. So, we sat down and tried to put together a mix of characters. We found a piece of a costume here, a part of a name there, and then we created new characters that fit the visuals we came up with, in the kind of mix we wanted to do.

Storm was originally a character called the Black Cat and there was a male

1977 — Wrightson's wrap-around cover for Len's original Swampy (reprint).

"I've never seen a penny from X-MEN or WOLVERINE."

character called Typhoon in the group. This is years before a "Typhoon" appeared in FIRESTORM, Roy said, "Why don't you take those two characters and make one character out of them?" So we mixed them up, but that's why Storm has those cat eyes. Those eyes are great. We gave that visual the Typhoon powers, and we got Storm instead of the Black Cat.

PAT: *Any other characters you're really big on from that group?*

LEN: I like 'em all. I wanted a mix that was international in scope. The one thing I will probably never forgive Chris for is giving Storm the origin of Modesty Blaise. It's verbatim the origin of Modesty Blaise, absolutely nothing different about it, almost word-for-word the origin. I intended for her to have lived there. The fact that she's from the States and spent her time in Africa loses that quality from the book.

PAT: *Did you like THE X-MEN cartoon?*

LEN: Not terribly. It was typical. I don't know when Wolverine became Australian, for example.

PAT: *What do you think about film plans for the characters?*

LEN: Plans have been made for every character in the business in the last 20 years. I don't believe any of it until I see someone filming it. And it's 60/40 if it ever hits the screen. I mean, where's THE PUNISHER movie? It's already been made.

PAT: *Have you made profits off the Wolverine toys and posters?*

LEN: No, I've seen nothing. I've never seen a penny from THE X-MEN or WOLVERINE.

PAT: *Of all you've written, what's your favorite story?*

LEN: I don't know! *(Laughter.)* I'm not sure — I have some favorite stories, but I don't think I have a favorite. We're always evolving the stuff, so what might have been great five years ago isn't something you look back on fondly today. It all changes. There was a SPIDER-MAN story that worked pretty nicely, "The Last 100 Yards."

I did a BATMAN story called "Haven" that I'm really fond of. It was inspired by a **Dan Fogelberg** song I heard on the radio. It was called "Netherlands," it evoked those feelings and the story wrote itself. Every time you do an issue you set up a different goal — "What Do I Want To Do This Issue?" and it changes every month depending on how successful you were in what you set out to do. So, it's erratic.

PAT: *Speaking of BATMAN, I recognized a lot of scenes similar to your "Joker's Birthday Party" story in the movie, right down to the climax with the giant cake . . .*

LEN: I guess there were! That was one of my favorite stories, too. "Dreadful Birthday, Dear Joker." (BATMAN #321, currently reprinted in THE GREATEST BATMAN STORIES EVER TOLD). It was fun to write . . . Every time I've written the Joker I've had a great time. Working with **Walt Simonson** was also a kick. We've worked several times together and always had a good time. One of the first comics **Marv Wolfman** and I did was a Batman story in DETECTIVE drawn by **Neal Adams.**

PAT: *Was it fun working with Neal Adams?*

LEN: Sometimes. The trick was: "Would he ever get the artwork in?" He and I did a werewolf story in BATMAN, "Moon of the Wolf," that took him almost two years to draw!

PAT: *As writer of the definitive Bat miniseries, THE UNTOLD LEGEND OF THE BATMAN, what do you think of what DC's done with BATMAN in the last couple years?*

LEN: Not very much. I don't think it's had a point of view for years. Bruce Wayne ceased being a character in that book three or four years ago. He shows up occasionally, but he's nobody, he's a cipher. I'm very excited that Marv is writing the book now. He's got a point of view and a sense of purpose, I think that will help tremendously.

I thought "A Death in the Family" was abominable, terribly done. Not the fact that they killed Robin, that's neither here nor there, but they should have done it in a much better story. It's a terrible, illogical story and for that alone is suffers. UNTOLD LEGEND OF THE BATMAN has just been rereleased from Tor Books. If I see a check from them, I'll

Arthur Adams pencils & inks on Len's/Cockrum's Wolverine character, 1980.

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"You always leave a book before you're done with it."

be thrilled.

PAT: *You also did one of the company crossovers, BATMAN VS. THE HULK . . .*

LEN: I had two of my longest runs on those two books, so everyone was pleased to have me do it, I was pleased to do it and had no problems whatsoever. It was a lot of fun, especially working with **Garcia-Lopez** as the artist. He's one of the best in the business, he's busy working on a three-issue format book called TWILIGHT, written by **Howard Chaykin.** I've seen the first two issues and they're stunning.

PAT: *What was your favorite supporting cast?*

LEN: Wow, what a weird question! The BATMAN cast. I added a couple of members to that, making Selina Kyle (Catwoman) a member and Lucius Fox, Bruce Wayne's accountant. Marv's about to bring him back, I'm told. DC didn't know where I was going with the character, so they wrote him out. I had plans for Lucius and his son set up very specifically for stories I never had a chance to do. You always leave a book before you're done with it. You get your kicks out in the last few days and you

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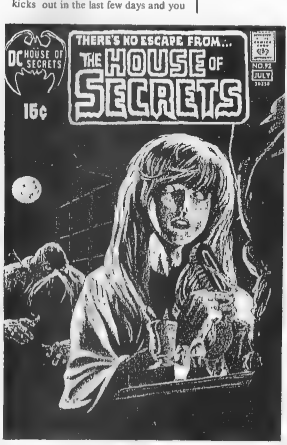
Clockwise from top: Berni Wrightson's original wash piece for HOUSE OF SECRETS #92 (1971), the cover as printed, and, 14 years later, homage is paid by John Totleben.



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Wein: "BROTHER VOODOO, a dumb series I had fun writing." Left, John Romita Sr.'s original designs for the character's outfit. Right, original pencils by the series artist, Gene Colan.

"I spent a lot of weekends at Jack Kirby's place."

leave the book on a high of some sort.

PAT: *Your stories are known for emotion and alienation, through writing characters like Deadman and Swamp Thing. Any particular reason?*

LEN: I guess I identify. I tend to write emotional characters because I'm an emotional person. I'm one of those people who goes around with everything I'm feeling right out in front. Everyone knows what mood I'm in on any given day.

PAT: *Do you have a hero?*

LEN: Jack Kirby. Marv and I spent a lot of weekends at Jack's place as kids. It's very strange. Looking through things, I discovered **Mike Sekowsky** lived in my neighborhood. This is before fandom, in the early '60s, so we called up and said "We're fans of your stuff, can we come by and say hi?" We didn't know what we'd do. We spent the afternoon being shown JUSTICE LEAGUE pages he was working on. He told us "If you kids want to stop bothering me, **Joe Giella** lives in the area."

Joe told us about **Frank Giacoia,** God rest his soul, and down the line we met other people and discovered **Jack Kirby** lived bike-riding distance from us as kids. Jack was a consummate gentleman. For my money, without **Jack Kirby,** comics wouldn't be as we know them today.

PAT: *What do you think of Stan Lee?*

LEN: I think Stan's a genius -- one of the few true geniuses this industry has ever known. His instincts are absolutely infallible; I've never once seen him make a wrong move.

PAT: *What are your influences?*

LEN: I draw inspiration from three places: the media, my personal experience and the need to get a paycheck every couple weeks! *(Laughter.)*

PAT: *Yes, it's that artistic drive that propels you forward —*

LEN: Yeah, it's called the mortgage! Actually that's part of it, part of it's the deadline. There are times when I know the next issue of some book is due and I have no idea what I'm going to do until I know if it's not in by Friday the artist will be sitting on his hands not working! *(Laughter.)* So suddenly it comes to me! A lot of times it works that way.

PAT: *So what's the fastest comic you've ever put out?*

LEN: There was an issue of GREEN LANTERN that was running very late, so we put together an entire issue in 48 hours! I wrote a TALES OF THE GREEN LANTERN CORPS that **Gil Kane** drew quickly. We got it out completely in less than a week!

PAT: *What was your favorite cover?*

LEN: I was cover editor at DC and Marvel, and specifically remember a Poison Ivy story with a BATMAN cover that had him, the logo, everything

They're ba-aa-ack! By Len (script), Gil Kane and Dave Cockrum.

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"I got my start in various fanzines over the years."

covered with ivy. One of my favorites was a FLASH cover I did that introduced the Rainbow Raider and it was covered with color.

PAT: *What's the worst book you've ever done?*

LEN: I did a two-issue Eclipso story in ADVENTURE COMICS two years ago. Eclipso is one of my favorite characters, but it was one of the worst stories I ever did!

PAT: *Another book you did, MARVEL TEAM-UP, used to take a lot of heat no matter who wrote it . . .*

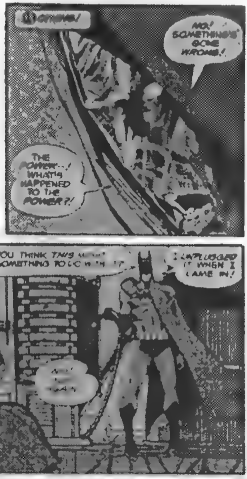
LEN: MARVEL TEAM-UP was a lot of fun because each month it was a different book. People hated writing TEAM-UPs, but I enjoyed it because of the interdynamics of the characters, the personalities to mesh with. It was a Marvel story: hero met hero, you had them beat up each other, then find a villain to beat up. I did a lot of those. It would always generate action and action was Marvel's watchword. You did what you could to get as much action into the story as possible.

PAT: *What was your first sale?*

LEN: To **Joe Orlando,** for HOUSE OF MYSTERY. The story never saw print after all these years . . . 21 years later it's still in a drawer somewhere. Getting in, I hate to say, was very easy for me. I brought in some samples that Marv had written, I had drawn and Marv inked, to show them to **Joe Orlando** up at DC. He came out of his office, and after looking them over, said "Well, the writing has promise, but the artwork is so-so. If you guys would like to try submitting story ideas to HOUSE OF MYSTERY," which he had just become editor of, "feel free." So I went home, wrote a story that night, came back the next day and he bought it.

I got my start in the fanzines. **Marv Wolfman** and I worked together and separately in various fanzines over the years, and I think that's where the powers-that-be first saw our work. **Steve Ditko** did covers for my fanzines, and he was my guest at a convention.

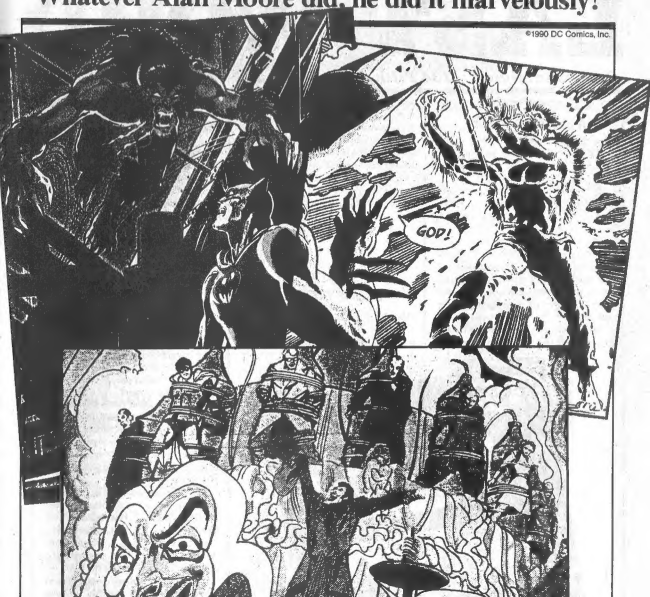
PAT: *What did you think of Alan*


GRRRRR!
HEY! SOMETHING'S GONE WRONG!
THE POWER--! WHATTH HAPPENED TO THE POWER?!
DO YOU THINK THIS MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH IT?
I NOTICED IT WHEN I CAME IN!

"If A Man Be Made Of Clay" (DETECTIVE #479, 1978) by Len Wein, Marshall Rogers & Dick Giordano.

©1980 DC Comics, Inc.

"Whatever Alan Moore did, he did it marvelously!"



Cover/panel for BATMAN #255 (Neal Adams) and a panel from the team of Wein & Simonson — BATMAN #321.

Moore's handling of SWAMP THING?

LEN: Everyone asks me that and most people don't remember I was the editor on most of those early issues where Alan changed everything! *(Laughter.)* Obviously I approved or I wouldn't let him do it!

PAT: *Yeah, but sex on the Moon?!*

LEN: Whatever Alan did, I thought he did it marvelously!

PAT: *What did you think of the SWAMP THING movies?*

LEN: I had a great time with SWAMP THING II, really enjoyed myself. The SWAMP THING movies had nothing to do with the book I wrote, but it was nice to see the character out there and especially nice to see the credit on the second movie ("Created by Len Wein and Bernt Wrightson"), they did a lot of nice things.

On the first film, they flew me down to Raleigh, North Carolina, one of the places they were filming . . . out in the swamps. It was very weird, because they'd say "Watch where you walk." I asked "Why?" "Well, you don't want to step on a cottonmouth or a rattler." I said "Fine!" so I stayed in the truck a lot!

PAT: *You never saw a swamp while doing SWAMP THING?*

LEN: Not really! I'm a native New Yorker — aside from the Lower East Side I couldn't find a swamp! *(Laughter.)*

LAST WORD

Comics Interview 234 Fifth Ave. Suite 301 New York, NY 10001

COMICS TODAY: A HUSTLER'S MARKET

Dear COMICS INTERVIEW:

This is in response to your wish of hearing from people regarding the comic-book business today.

Is it ever commercialized! Of course comics prices have risen over the years, as it even is expensive to buy *new* comics as well as old!

But the influx of graphic novels and limited series is basically a racket to make collectors spend more money. For what? Art that is not comparable to the great art of years ago? Today's stories do not have the essence one found in the '60s, for instance.

Sure, gullible collectors today do not buy a comic to appreciate its contents, but buy multiple copies of an issue, hoping it will increase in value — not even bothering to read the contents. Such a person will be found scanning the condition of a brand new comic, feeling along the staples and checking the covers to make sure there are no defects. Pure sickness!

Yes, comics today are 95% commercialization! A hustler's market.

Stan Warpechowski
49 Johnson Parkway
Buffalo, NY 14201

GROTH: LORD OF THE FLIES?

Dear DAK:

I just want to say I agree with that letter about THE COMICS JOURNAL in INTERVIEW #88. If **Groth** were on the other side of the issue, you know the **Jack Kirby** interview he ran would give him ample grist to take Jack apart in one of those pyrotechnic "look-at-me" editorials. But just as he didn't mention in a finger-wagging editorial that Malibu publisher **Dave Olbrich** once worked for Fantagraphics (editing AMAZING HEROES, no less!) neither will you ever see Gary being even-handed or understanding if he can help it.

After all, that wouldn't advance his interests.

I recently saw the remake of LORD OF THE FLIES. Most of us read the book in school, but the movie serves as a reminder. The kid who's not in command wants nothing more than to have his own gang, and his motives become glaringly more obvious as the movie progresses. I see a parallel here — and an ever more obvious and naked one, at that. Call it: "grasping after power."

As those familiar with LORD OF THE FLIES know, the interests of civilization were not advanced, but set back by this behavior — regressed to a brutal and savage state. Despite its high-blown pretensions, is that really what the JOURNAL is all about?

The aforementioned letter omitted mention of one of **Groth's** other disciples in THE JOURNAL, **Harvey Pekar.** Let's face it, **Pecker** *(sic)* couldn't write his way out of a wet paper bag — he's an author the way someone with an instamatic camera is an artist. Big fuckin' deal.

It's about time someone put a stop to **Groth's** transparent attempts to bully everyone into buying his power position, by pointing out that most of what he promotes as art is crap — no better and often far worse than the superhero stuff he hates so much.

I know I seem to be attacking your opposition here, but it's only by way of example, to somehow indicate what you *don't* do in COMICS INTERVIEW and what, by contrast, makes this magazine so good.

Harold A. Harvey
316 E. 77th St. #4D
New York, NY

What is this — open season on THE JOURNAL? And, just so you know, I don't consider THE COMICS JOURNAL opposition at all.

— DAK

COMICS INTERVIEW #93

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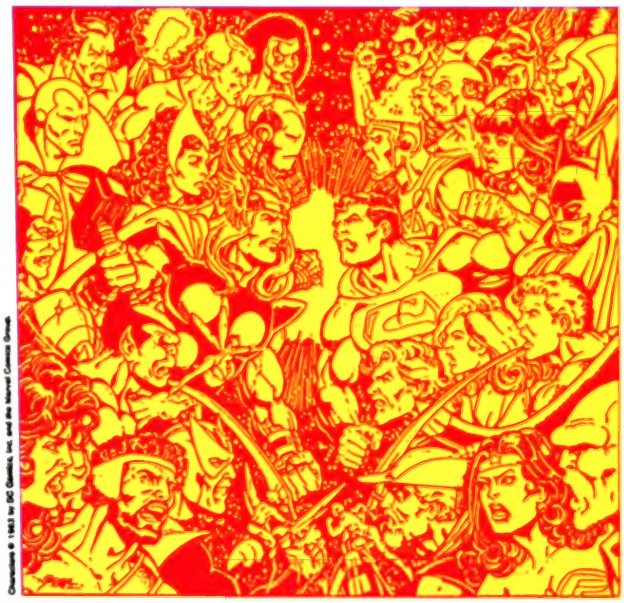

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